

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

8846

State Dept. review completed

INFORMATION

SECRET

May 13, 1970  
*via Watts*

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Lindsey Grant *ll*

SUBJECT: FIAB Meeting: Proposed Discussion of SNIE on Laos

You indicated that you wished to discuss SNIE 58-70 "The Communist View of the Situation in Laos" at the next FIAB meeting.

The particular issues which you wanted to raise were

- Page 7. Shouldn't the SNIE set forth the historical record as well as the Communists' view of it?
- Page 8. Shouldn't the SNIE give the gamut of estimates concerning Communist intentions rather than providing a least common denominator?

*No*  
The next FIAB meeting is scheduled for June 4-5, and Mr. Watts has included discussion of this SNIE on the agenda.

I attach

- Tab A. The memorandum to you dated March 31, on which you noted your questions.
- Tab B. SNIE 58-70.

*I will discuss it informally at lunch.*  
As you suggested, we have raised your two points with CIA (James Graham in ONE).

PFIAB/NSC review completed

Attachments

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*I do not want a formal issue made*  
MAY 19 1970

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MEMORANDUM

Grand paper  
THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

June 4-5

March 31, 1970

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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: John H. Holdridge *for**I want this for  
my miss meeting  
with F.A.B.*SUBJECT: Notes on SNIE 58-70 "The Communist View of the Situation  
in Laos"

APR 6 1970

You asked for comments on certain questions which you had raised concerning statements in the recent SNIE on Laos (Tab A).

Page 2. "While the Communists believe that the U. S. has violated the Geneva arrangements -- and have certainly done so themselves..." You ask whether we really believe this -- whether they believe it or pretend to believe it. You suggest that maybe we should rethink our own policy.

I think that the statement in the SNIE is correct, but perhaps is not very important. It would be hard to claim that we have not been violating the agreements in three important respects.

- mounting air raids from neighboring countries.
- playing a military advisory role.
- mounting operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On the point of violation of the Geneva agreements, the Communists undoubtedly know that they started violating them first -- though it is not Communist practice to admit this sort of thing, even to oneself. This is a much different question from the issue as to who started the escalation of the past two years (see below).

Page 6. "Specifically, they believe that the U. S. has subverted the neutralists, encouraged the RLG to penetrate areas rightfully controlled by the Communists, and used Laos to support the war against the Vietnamese people." You ask: How do we know this?

SECRET

SECRET

-2-

The answer of course is that we cannot with any certainty separate what they say from what they believe. I doubt that they make this separation very clearly themselves. As you know, the Communists tend to be moralistic, and this encourages them to fuzz or rationalize their perception of reality to accord with doctrine. This process is made easier by the fact that we did in 1963/64 provide considerable logistic support for Souvanna's neutralists, and that we developed the Meo guerrillas pretty much on our own, and then encouraged the RLG to acquiesce in guerrilla operations into areas which the Communists had considered "theirs". Some of our behavior over the past four years which they consider escalation is described in the section immediately below.

Page 7. "The Communists no doubt viewed the RLG capture of Nam Bac in 1966 and its use as a support base for guerrilla and intelligence operations in Phong Saly Province and other areas close to the Chinese borders, the establishment of navigation sites related to the war against North Vietnam such as Phou Pha Thi, the expansion into the Sedone Valley in the south, and the growth of Vang Pao's forces and their activities in areas of Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces as requiring retaliatory action. The RLG's recent rainy season operations against Muong Phine in the south and Vang Pao's successful drive across the Plain of Jars undoubtedly falls into the same category." You ask: "Then why the hell did we do it? and who wrote this report?"

The second of your two questions is the easier to answer. The SNIE is drafted by a branch of CIA (the Office of National Estimates) and rewritten by representatives from the principal intelligence outfits in Washington. It represents a joint document, and is cleared by a senior group convened for the purpose.

The statement is the SNIE is correct, though it is not complete. We come here to the old question: who started it? The SNIE sets forth the Communists' version. It does not really give the flavor of the time -- the Communists' capture of the "left neutralists" and the series of minor inroads into Government-held territory which encouraged us to retaliate.

It will take an historian to put together the complete answer as to why we did it. Some of the efforts, such as the establishment of a site at Phou Pha Thi, were undertaken to improve the accuracy of our bombing in North Vietnam. Others were taken because we had developed resources such as the Meo, and people were anxious to use them.

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*9 a. SNIE*  
*But shouldn't*  
*do precisely this - I want Helms*  
*called on it. Why stand*  
*only comm.*

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-3-

Perhaps the basic problem was the one which the Ad Hoc Group on Laos was created to counter: the fact that the war was run out of our Embassy in Vientiane, and received only the most casual scrutiny in Washington (usually by obtaining oral concurrence to CIA briefings at the Assistant Secretary level in State.) This was insufficient policy guidance from Washington to forestall new initiatives, or to set a framework to limit field enthusiasms.

Page 8. You ask whether the Communists' military actions in Laos are really largely responsive to our actions.

At this point in history, each side is responding in turn to escalation undertaken by the other. As to whether the Communists are deliberately pushing up the stakes, intelligence community estimates run the gamut, and this is compromise language. The most that can be said with any confidence is that the Communists are systematically pursuing a course of action intended to alter the political balance in Laos to their advantage, without yet having done anything which suggested a desire to overturn the remaining validity of the Geneva agreements (i. e., they have not tried to overthrow Souvanna). This has not been a high-priority target, compared to those in South Vietnam, judging by the patience with which the Communists have proceeded. If the cost of pursuing the objective appears too high -- e.g., if we make it militarily expensive -- they may be prepared to back away from the active pursuit of the objective, so long as they can continue to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Any hope for stabilization in Laos depends upon achieving this balance -- allowing the Communists to protect what they consider their basic interests in Laos, while we make it expensive enough to deter them from the pursuit of their maximum objectives.

Page 12. You ask why we didn't withdraw from the Plain of Jars last summer. This is perhaps the most poignant and recent example of the tendency for the field to allow immediate opportunities to sway its judgments as to what we should do to advance our broad strategy. The attack was launched before it was scrutinized in Washington, and the decision was made to try to hold the Plain without referral to Washington. In Washington we were getting descriptions of the operation as a raid to destroy Communist stocks in the Plain, and thus inhibit any further Communist advance beyond Muong Soui. At the same time, the Lao King, Souvanna, and Vang Pao were elated by their success and agreed to hold the Plain. Our Mission went along with the decision. The judgment was later questioned from Washington, but no sufficiently firm decision was taken to instruct Ambassador Godley to tell the Lao that we would not go along with the decision.

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-4-

It takes a strong hand, presumably from Washington, to subordinate the exploitation of targets of opportunity to a broader strategic plan.

The institution of the Laos Ad Hoc Group and the intensified scrutiny of our Laos operations by WSAG were of course meant to remedy this situation, and so far as I am aware, no important decisions have been taken by our people in Vientiane in recent months without referral to Washington.

Attachment

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**ATTACHMENT B**

**COPY OF SNIE 58-70 "The Communist View of the  
Situation in Laos"**